

## **Desegregated but Unequal: Some Paradoxes of Parent Involvement at Bromden Elementary**

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**Abstract:** In this article, we examine the behaviors and contrasting perspectives, attitudes, and expectations of three sets of stakeholders—school personnel and the two communities of parents that represented equal portions of the population at an elementary school that had recently undergone substantial restructuring resulting from a desegregation order. Based on our findings, we contend that disorganization, lack of communication, varying definitions of parent involvement, and unequal power relations hampered substantive parent involvement. We further conclude that these barriers reduce the school's capacity to engage parents in sustainable, meaningful home-school collaboration. We offer possible solutions, drawn from empirically-based literature on effective home-school interactions.

In recent years research knowledge about family involvement in education has increased considerably. Parent involvement is linked to

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improved student academic achievement, reduced dropout rates, improved attendance, and improved parental attitudes toward the learning process and toward schooling (see, for example, Ballantine 1999; Ford et al. 1998; Griffith 1996; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler 1997; Steinberg 1996; Zellman & Waterman 1998). Epstein (1983) found that parents' positive perception toward teachers is tied to teachers' efforts in involving parents. This finding is particularly relevant when considering findings such as Reed-Danahay's (2000) that link children's perceptions of their teachers and the education process to their parents' perspectives of these. Delgado-Gaitan (1991: 23) reports, "When parents do not participate in the schools, children face negative consequences. Barriers are created between children and the teacher, as well as between the parents and the school."

Although school-based and school-implemented programs are designed to enhance relations and continuity between a child's home and the school, seldom do such efforts lead to comprehensive, sustainable programs. School personnel often interpret parents' lack of involvement in school-sanctioned efforts as lack of interest, or lack of caring. Parents see this quite differently. In her ethnographic study of Mexican American parents' views, Valdez (1996) found that parents emphasized their educational role as moral, rather than academic. Teachers and other school personnel interpreted their disengagement from specific school related tasks as apathy toward the school and the educational process in general.

Beyond the issue of discrepant interpretations of parental responsibilities related to education is the question of how parental involvement can be operationalized so as to capitalize on parents' skills and comfort level when engaging in school related activities. In a study of exemplary teachers of African American children in inner city schools, Ladson-Billings (1994) reported a range of parent involvement practices that the teachers tailored to the interests and skills of individual parents. At some schools in our larger study, some teachers and parents maintained regular bi-directional communication via the "Backpack express." This means of "conversation" permitted home-based reinforcers such as monitoring homework or reporting on completion of classroom tasks, as well as sharing information about the child's socio-emotional state.

Building on and spotlighting parents' skills enhanced mutual home school respect and cooperation. Similarly, Maton, et al (2003) favor strengths-based approaches to working with children and families, which is part of a multidisciplinary movement organized around resilience, health promotion, school reform and community development. The overarching theme is that the promotion of strengths among individuals, families, schools and communities is a more effective strategy than identifying and addressing deficits.

In his ethnographic depiction of working-class Mexican-American students and families, Luis Moll (1992) describes families as having a good deal of knowledge of which school personnel were unaware and were, therefore, unable to appraise. Families participating in the study displayed knowledge about agriculture, medicine, and household economics and maintenance. According to Moll, these “funds of knowledge” (the information, methods of thinking and learning, and practical skills related to a community’s everyday life) are passed via social networks.

We were interested in parental participation as part of a larger investigation of the processes by which African American and Hispanic (primarily of Caribbean and Mexican descent) students were placed into special education programs. Parental participation in school affairs was a central concern because the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) calls for such participation and because school personnel tended to blame family practices and environments for children’s academic and behavioral difficulties. Among the twelve schools in the study, data on home-school interaction at one school presented unique concerns tied to the demographic makeup of its stakeholders.

In this article, we examine the behaviors and contrasting perspectives, attitudes, and expectations of three sets of stakeholders—school personnel and the two communities of parents that represented equal portions of the population at an elementary school that had recently undergone substantial restructuring resulting from a desegregation order. The purpose of this research was to portray examples of parent involvement presented through both school personnel and parents’ perspectives. This is different from traditional literature on parent involvement which tends to focus on the perspectives and concerns of schools (i.e., Epstein, 1983). Perspectives will be used to develop a definition of the different types of parent involvement occurring. Then, from perceptions about parent involvement and the failures noted by stakeholders, we offer possible solutions, drawn from empirically-based literature on effective home-school interactions.

## Methods

Our presence at the site and rapport with participants provided opportunities to enter what Robson (1994) refers to as participants’ “social and symbolic world through learning their social conventions and habits, their use of language and non-verbal communication.” Understandings unfolded as data were collected, analyzed, and tested by subsequent findings. Saturation was accomplished through constant comparative analysis of our primary sources of data, interviews and observations. To

better understand roles, perceived needs, and thoughts about policies, we interviewed and observed two counselors, a social worker, teachers, the principal and assistant principal, a community involvement specialist, the full service coordinator, the psychologist, and parents who represented a broad range of levels of involvement (from those who participated in school activities often to those who were involved only when required to do so, and those who advocated on behalf of their children and communities). During weekly site visits for nearly three years, we also observed interactions between parents and school personnel, as well as between the two populations in various settings including child study team meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and casual encounters at the school, and in the communities. To give us a better understanding of the context, we collected extant data from school profiles, newspapers, and census data.

### Local History and Shifts in Boundary

The brightly colored building, enclosed by a 10-foot tall spiked fence, made Bromden Elementary stand out from the rest of Perimeter, one of the lowest socio-economic status communities in Florida where over 98 percent of the school population received free lunch. Bromden itself, was a full service community school providing both in school and after school outreach programs to children and families. The five hundred African American and five hundred Mexican children attending the school were representative of the community. The relatively small urban area was comprised of about 45 hundred African Americans, who had lived in the area for several generations, and 25 hundred migrant farmworkers, who had recently begun to consider Perimeter a place of seasonal and permanent residence (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000) despite harsh economic conditions.

Perimeter supported little industry. Seasonal tourism and agriculture were economic mainstays. Nearly a decade ago, after a major hurricane, many local businesses and a military base closed, further reducing the number of local jobs. Soon afterwards, the middle-class residents left, leaving behind the lowest-income population. At the time of the study, about 75 percent of the residents received Federal and State aid. Many sought day work in vacation homes for an average of \$6.00 per hour or worked for the school as administrative aides, custodians, cafeteria workers, or security. Others peddled drugs or were otherwise involved in the informal economy. Given the paucity of public transportation, Perimeter was geographically separated from economic opportunities outside of the area.

While most residents of the small urban area were African American, two camps housed Mexican seasonal laborers a few miles west of downtown. Established in the center of agricultural land bordering wetlands, each camp consisted of about 250 small duplexes that were owned and maintained by the federal government. Enormous fields were peppered with fruit stands, public telephones, and family owned convenience stores where workers sent remittances to Mexico and purchased most of their food. Workers and families trickled into Perimeter in early October and began departing in April, following the harvest cycles of the East Coast. One mother said [I pick] “thirty-two pounds of string beans for three dollars. I don’t take a lunch. I don’t go to the bathroom. I just pick, pick, pick so I can make thirty-five, forty dollars tops in a good day.” A small percentage had made Perimeter a permanent home, working for local year-round nurseries or leasing small tracts of land and then hiring workers to perform the labor.

Before their integration into Bromden, migrant children attended another Perimeter school, comprised mostly of migrant students. In a few cases, children did not attend school because their families moved often and saw little benefit in attaining an education. Some families held the expectation that their children would become farmworkers (interview with former farmworker and parent activist).

Bromden’s teaching force consisted of 61 teachers, most of whom were in their first five years in that profession. Although about one fourth of the teachers were African American and more than half were Hispanic (mostly of Cuban descent), none lived in the immediate area and few attached themselves socially to the community. The administrative team consisted of a Hispanic principal and an Assistant principal of Afro-Caribbean descent. Service providers included a full-service coordinator, two counselors, a psychologist, two community involvement specialists, and a social worker. The principal, a warm, caring person with a robust character, greeted visitors with an embrace. Despite this warmth, however, the teaching, service, and administrative team worked in relative isolation from one another and were inundated with constant crises.

#### *Busing at Bromden*

The original school, built in the 1940s, was named after a prominent Black businessman. According to community members, the school was a major source of stability that defined the neighborhood’s spirit. That changed when Federal investigators determined that the school’s region was ethnically segregated. After the 1970 desegregation order was executed, *de facto* integration in many schools was stymied by distances between communities. When given a choice between neighborhood

schools and less segregated schools, many parents supported neighborhood schools rather than the busing children to schools that were geographically far from their local communities. This ability to choose changed when Federal investigators determined that the school's region was ethnically segregated.

In 1997, the school system renamed the building Bromden Elementary, after a former district leader. Neighbors were outraged by the decision that re-framed an important symbol of the community and did so without input from its members. The pastor of the Perimeter Baptist Church said, "[The school system] never intended to listen to the community. This is a sad loss for democracy in this community." The renaming coincided with news that the school boundaries were to be altered. In autumn 1997, the school saw new faces as its population doubled to a little over 1,000 when Mexican students were bussed from labor camps.

Until then, African Americans and Mexicans did not interact in any prolonged way outside of school and did not know much about each other's community life. For example, African Americans said they were unfamiliar with the name Benito Juarez, but some knew it was the name of the park where Mexicans played soccer. Similarly, Mexicans were unsure for whom the main street was named, "M. L. King Boulevard."

The boundary change, as well as accompanying rumors and fears, affected the two populations in several ways. From the African American perspective, the renaming and busing were infringements on what historically had belonged to them. The school population had been, according to community members, "all Black for many generations." African Americans also expressed concern over possible competition for jobs and about rumors that migrant children had transmittable health problems. Mexicans were also concerned. For example, in a small group interview at a labor camp, parents shared stories they had heard about how their children may be treated. As a response, a mother recalled, "I was thinking about using a friend's address so that [my son] could go to Westtown [elementary school migrant children used to attend]. Some of my friends did that." Others agreed. The change in school boundaries set into motion chasms at the school that were solidified in socially separate spaces and based on limited knowledge.

While just after the consolidation many parents were suspicious or afraid of potential negative outcomes, a relative few, including the school's counselors, the social worker, and a handful of teachers and parents, saw the change as an opportunity to improve relations between families and the school. During the second year, Miss Jessie, an African American grandmother and a Mexican mother, Señora Pinera, donned the role of advocate and parent activist. This bond became evident once

“parent activists” discovered that they were appealing to the school for similar interests such as transportation, supervision before and after school, and access to full-service assistance programs.

#### *Parent Involvement Program*

The parent involvement program at Bromden was unfocused, unilaterally planned, unequally targeted, and was not part of a strategic plan. The social worker was responsible for coordinating the full-service program while the community involvement specialist, counselors, and Title I teachers initiated and managed other efforts to interact with parents. Because no ongoing, formal linkage existed between these roles, service provision was disorganized and commonly those working with parents were unaware of other efforts within the school. With help from the full-service program, which made available discretionary funds for faculty and staff to use in the design and implementation of individual programs, the parent involvement program consisted of discrete and sometimes fleeting efforts, including teachers' attempts to encourage parents to visit or volunteer to work in class, counselor-initiated morning breakfast meetings, speaker events, holiday events, family health seminars, an after school parent computer class, and a parent literacy class.

This constellation of services continuously shifted according to availability of program funding and decisions made by school leadership, faculty and service providers. Funding, especially that derived from community businesses, fluctuated considerably and sponsored university-based studies were initiated and terminated with funding cycles. One such program that provided parenting classes for single, young mothers, several of whom had children at Bromden, was discontinued without notice to its participants. Community services that provided cost-free services in the form of workshops and donations changed their level of participation with little or no warning and for reasons that were unclear to the research team. In addition to the ever-changing external influences, in-house changes in focus in occurred which members of the school staff created new efforts and withdrew other efforts without notice.

One example of redundancy, disorganization, impermanence, and one-dimensional planning was that the social worker and counselor worked exclusively with Mexican parents. They established programs that provided basic assistance to undocumented parents and provided guidance to parents on school-related and personal issues. The counselor created a lunchtime anger management program for parents whose children exhibited aggressive behavior. After two weeks of only a few parents coming to the anger management luncheon regularly, he created a lunch program for parents whose children were struggling with



adapting to their new social setting, primarily the few Mayan-speaking families. The parents were asked to come to his office and speak about the ways in which the transition was difficult and were guided to construct their own solutions. During the first meeting, members of the first group came to find the switch in focus. While one stayed, others appeared disappointed as they left. As another example, the social worker provided services on an individual, case-by-case basis. It was ordinary to see a Mexican mother sobbing thankfully for the social worker's ability to locate, through local agencies and service providers, housing, food, counseling, health services, and on a few occasions, cash. Seldom were decisions based on assessment of needs, evaluation of existing efforts, or in coordination with other efforts. Because discrete programs targeted one population, specific personnel were associated with their program focus. Services were provided to parents who asked for help, but there were no systematic efforts to locate families in need and determine level of need.

When school functions included both groups, African American and Mexican parents were seldom observed interacting and were not encouraged to do so. A basic assumption of those hosting functions was that the communities did not communicate with one another. The two populations were escorted to separate seats in meetings and other functions such as a holiday pageant we observed. Further, activities did not promote interactions since parents were provided neither opportunity to interact with one another nor with the school and, therefore, provided no input to program focus, design, or evaluation.

The implementation of programs targeting one population served to protract the separation between groups. For instance, only Mexican parents were invited to a meeting concerning breakfast service, although this also affected African Americans. Similarly, only African American parents were invited to literacy, homework, and math assistance programs established by the African American community involvement specialist. Families, including Bromden's two White non-Hispanic families, noted unequal targeting. A mother who was repeatedly refused services shared:

It's like Ms. Barilla, she's helping all the Spanish people. The Spanish people come in. She gets clothes for 'em and food for 'em and all this other stuff. Talk about 'Oh I be helping you.' But if I was a wetback, I'd be getting all kinds of help. They would be real helpful if I was a wetback.

Unequal targeting was also noted in afterschool care provision, which seemed to isolate the two student populations. For example, the Migrant Education Program provided services for migrant students while the YMCA provided services exclusively for African American students. In addition, after a Boy Scout troop was set up through the Migrant



Education Program, if one was to exist for African American boys, it had to be established separately.

Recently, López, Scribner, and Mahitivanichcha (2001: 283) suggested reformulating parent involvement to include a set of coordinated educational and non-educational services, "which focus primarily on the entire well-being of migrant families." Indeed, this seemed to be the core aim of the full-service program. We found at Bromden a poorly defined and communicated notion of "well-being," inconsistent and unequally offered array of services, as well as mistrust, questioning of competence, and low instrumental and substantive involvement. Although school personnel declared dutiful interest in increasing parent involvement, their efforts failed to include parent representatives in the planning process and although the services were similar, did not share information about what did and did not work, much less a shared market. Bromden staff's willingness to experiment with new innovative parent involvement strategies was overshadowed by the needs of the moment. The constant crisis mode of operation left unexamined many potential opportunities for learning and sharing the effectiveness of those practices.

#### Alms, Accommodation, or Alliance? Defining Parent Involvement

Even with a full-service program and school-wide Title I funding, intentional campus leadership and teacher endeavors at Bromden Elementary were widely unsuccessful in generating ongoing relations and continuity between families and the school. Parent participation in school-sponsored activities was low. School personnel perspectives supported our observation findings. Specifically, they described as minimal families' active participation in school affairs, such as participation in or response to parent conferences, assistance with or attention to children's homework, and provision of required materials.

Before proceeding, a working definition of parent involvement would be helpful. Education research shows a range of conceptualizations of what does or should constitute parent involvement often pointing to the influence of cultural traditions in defining parental roles. A spectrum extends from instrumental involvement in which parents are expected to meet school requests (e.g., showing up for conferences) to involvement as substantive partners in school affairs (e.g., integral members of leadership teams). Often, parents are asked to attend events, respond to the school's requests, ensure that their children are progressing in school, and completing homework (Fine 1993). In the middle of the spectrum is more frequent, top-down involvement. As Epstein (1987)

asserts “most parents are not involved in deep, detailed, or frequent communications with teachers.” Indeed, such involvement is not always expected or desired by school personnel or by parents. Top-down, instrumentalist approaches seldom take into account socio-cultural differences and do not invoke a sense of agency among prospective participants (Lareau 1996).

At the far end of the spectrum is deep, substantive involvement in which parents are perceived as partners with school personnel in such efforts as school reform. Several studies (e.g., Freeman & Karr-Kidwell 1998; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997) demonstrate that parents who have both a sense of shared ownership of the school’s processes and a sense of efficacy are likely to be involved. This is most likely to be characteristic of parents who share the ethnicity of school personnel and possess influence through Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of social capital. Lareau’s (1989) ethnographic study of the comparative involvement and influence of parent involvement demonstrated that higher income parents were able to create an education tailored to their children’s needs and aspirations, while lower-income parents had little influence on educational experiences. Substantive involvement may include sharing the goals and activities of reform efforts, collaborating with school personnel regularly, and volunteering to assist in tutoring or other academic programs. Another form of substantive involvement takes shape outside the school’s normal parameters and policies (e.g., parents forming voluntary associations to dispute school policy or action).

We used our dataset to guide an empirical definition of parent involvement. For most school personnel, involvement meant ensuring that the school was conforming adequately to standards by increasing frequency of contact with parents, boosting parents’ responsiveness to meeting requests, and making parents accountable for providing homework assistance. For parents, a range of behaviors were observed and most parents, over time, reflected more than one form of involvement. A theme in several of those behaviors is that the school is an instrumental institution, a service provider. The following types of involvement are in order of most commonly observed to least commonly observed. These headings were developed directly from the data given to us by stakeholders.

#### *Disconnection*

Many parents were not involved or were only minimally involved in school activities. This corresponds with literature that indicates that general views of parents’ roles *vis-a-vis* those of school personnel are often at odds (Valdes 1996). A range of factors are associated with this observation. First, associated with the constant shift in programs and

differential promotion of them, parents were not uniformly aware of assistance offered at the school or did not know they were eligible to use them. Additionally, regardless of ethnicity, some parents expressed intimidation, fear, and mistrust of school personnel. African American parents shared examples of how the school, or schooling in general, differed before the boundary shift, recalling close-knit faculty that communicated easily with parents. The “doors were open for all of us. We felt like we were at home.” An administrative aid wrote a poem describing how the school that was once the hub of the community had become a “cold, nameless place.”

It is sad to see what was once a bright,  
Shining star now with out even a flicker...  
I don't recognize this place anymore.  
There was a time we could fight one minute  
and make up the next.  
That is what friends and family do.  
Now we are a staff and everyone is at war.

Also contributing, knowledge about school and district policy varied among parents, but was generally low for both African Americans and Mexicans. Few parents were aware of their rights to challenge school policy and administrative decisions. For instance, many parents felt they had no choice but to accept school decisions for special education placement of their children. For teachers, however, limited involvement was not at all troubling since the absence of parents meant fewer hassles. Although teachers felt relieved by the minimal interactions with parents, many shared the belief that parents did not participate because they did not value education.

It was not uncommon for parents to express desire to help their children academically or become involved in school events. Also expressed was uncertainty about what roles or actions were acceptable and available to parents. Mexican parents with whom we spoke indicated a belief that school personnel should assume control of children during school hours and that parents can help best by providing children material and moral sustenance while staying out of the teacher's way.

#### *Withdrawal*

Another form of disconnection from the school was brought on by exasperation. Some parents who had participated in the past discontinued their participation in school activities. Those parents told us that although they attended meetings (e.g., meetings to determine a child's potential placement into special education), they were seldom provided

an opportunity to give input. For instance, in a group interview at a labor camp, Mexican mothers said that they were never given a chance to speak at school meetings. Similarly, several African American mothers said that when they spoke they felt that they were not taken seriously and seldom were their ideas or input put into action. Once parents interpreted their efforts to be unsuccessful, they tended to withdraw from interactions with the school. Withdrawal also resulted from frustration and discomfort in differential program provision, as well as disorganized implementation of services. Lustig (1997) found that exclusion and conflict among African American and Hispanic students resulted from multicultural education efforts that were not implemented systematically. It appears that when parents encountered programs that were not systematically implemented, conflict and exclusion followed.

#### *Occlusion*

Paradoxically, school personnel regarded the relatively few parents who attempted to be substantively involved as a nuisance. These parents were often occluded or blocked from full participation in school events. One mother was referred to by a number of school personnel as “retarded” because she often voiced her opinion, which differed considerably from those of school personnel (the research team saw no indication of mental impairment). Singled out, the mother was left off invitations to school events. In addition, Miss White, who sought to improve ties between Mexicans and African Americans and who was well-received at various events, was described informally as an annoyance. Once this description was shared with the main office staff and the community involvement specialist, Miss White’s venue for communicating disappeared. Commonly, occluded parents were the same parents who questioned decisions presented in child study team meetings, who regularly attended school-related meetings arranged by parents to discuss campus concerns, or who complained about the treatment of a child. Teachers described Mexican parents (in comparison to African American parents) as easy to work with. Exceptions were produced when a group of mothers joined parent activists. Initially, the group met at the school, but as their meetings about transportation and other logistical issues turned into well-formulated complaints, their invitation to meet at the school was rescinded.

#### *Curbed*

Similar to occlusion, the handful of African Americans and Mexicans who considered themselves to be active in their neighborhoods’ renewal, building a bridge between the communities, and helping the school improve services for parents and students, believed that they had been

silenced through heavy loads of lackey work. Involvement with the school became more bureaucratic than they expected it to be. For instance, Señora Pinera, who spoke out to other parents about transportation problems and issues pertaining to supervision of children in the cafeteria, was asked to join the community involvement team. Once she did so, however, she became burdened with photocopying and other administrative tasks, decreasing her exposure to parents during the day. It is important to note that there was no indication in the data that school personnel consciously sought this outcome.

### *Engaged*

Despite negative experiences, for a few, parent involvement was a means to enhance the community and provide academic opportunities to students. Some parents established trust and rapport through their efforts at the school and developed a belief that they were able to contribute to the educational process. In contrast to failed efforts, some cases where trust and rapport were established between the school and parents led to increasing interest in helping with homework and meeting regularly with teachers. Five Mexican mothers, an African American mother, and two African American grandmothers made regular visits to classrooms. Typically, fewer than a dozen mothers attended the weekly breakfasts sponsored by the school and, from that group, three volunteered in classrooms and in the media center regularly. A few African Americans used their inroads with the school to adjust administrative decisions such as classroom placement of their children. Some parents who were alumni maintained existing ties to the school, particularly with the custodial staff, secretaries, and a few of the veteran teachers.

### *Activist*

Over the course of three years, a group of parents and school personnel had an increasingly influential role in asserting needs and acquiring services to meet those needs. Initially, three groups—one consisting of three Mexican mothers who were concerned about poor bus service, Miss Jessie who took on a personal mission to serve children in her neighborhood, and the third consisting of dedicated staff who saw potential in the students and the community—worked apart. In the second year, the three groups plus a dozen other mothers, came together to discuss school safety after a child was abducted from a nearby school. With bilingual staff mediating, but controlling the subject matter of the agenda, the two populations communicated similar concerns about campus security and supervision during departure. Although the Mexican and African American participants sat on opposite sides of the room

during that meeting, a vital connection was made when through an interpreter, Miss Jessie made the statement, "We need to work together for our school, our community, our children." By the third year, the group of 30 parents met somewhat regularly in community centers. Despite widespread inactivity and campus diffusion of efforts and goals, a handful of staff and parents forged a bridge of their own.

### *Social Capital and Negotiated Hegemony: School Personnel Perspectives*

Based on ethnic differences, a professional ideology of being qualified to work with children, and overall low levels of parent involvement, school personnel were generally convinced of the superiority of the school culture as compared to those of the communities they served. Cultural chasms resulted in home-school relations that were dominated by a view of the school setting as the source of nurturance and guidance absent in these children's homes and communities. Other studies have corroborated these findings among low-income, minority families (Harry 1992; Harry et al. 1995; Lynch & Stein 1987). Harry et al.'s (1995) study of African American parents' involvement also showed that assumptions about families' limitations based on demographic information can be erroneous: the most proactive advocates for their children were single mothers, all of whom were either receiving welfare benefits or employed in low paying jobs. In these studies, the interaction between school personnel's perceptions of parents combined with normative assumptions (e.g., nuclear families versus extended ones) and parents' expectations of their own roles presented a convincing picture of the role of social capital in parental empowerment.

Not only do gaps in cultural understanding and unequal power relations maintain rifts between homes and schools, but also parents and school personnel alike accept these differences as both are expected and immutable (see Bourdieu 1991; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977; Reed-Danahay 2000). Bourdieu uses the notion of the "habitus," which is defined as a system of predispositions to action and belief inculcated during early socialization. The habitus, which shapes individuals' ambitions, is comprised of external conditions of existence interpreted, given meaning, and appropriate action by those responsible for early socialization. These become the basis of perception and appreciation of subsequent experience. In this framework, children instilled with a habitus familiar in middle-class settings share common ambitions and expectations with teachers and the school (Reed-Danahay 2000; Delgado-Gaitan 1991). Thus, higher income families do not have "more" social capital, but

tend to possess a wider network of social connections that may be called upon in the school's field. In other words, behavioral norms, shared aspirations, and linguistic style are similar to those of school personnel. Conversely, lower-income families lack social capital valued by the school (Bourdieu 1977), and the school lacks an understanding of the habitus of populations different from its own. In this context, lower-income families possess social capital that, while valued in other fields, is undervalued in educational settings.

These differences are played out in mundane events, relationships, and communication. Day-to-day relations at the school were dominated by two contrasting views: (1) the school setting was the source of nurturance and guidance absent in these children's homes and communities and (2) the school setting was an institution that underserved the educational needs of its children.

#### *"A Little Nurturing Place"*

Administrators, the school psychologist, teachers (especially those who were new to the school), and a handful of Mexican substantively engaged parents viewed the school as a haven and viewed most other parents at the school as well meaning, but unable to make informed decisions or provide stable homes. Compounding these difficulties were problematic conditions, such as poverty, housing in high crime areas, and conflicting childrearing practices. Adherents to this view held that families did not devote sufficient effort to their child's academic preparation and that most parents were not involved in school activities. As a result, children were under-prepared socially, academically, and economically for school. Since the school was seen as a socio-emotional safe place, proponents saw it a duty to provide poor, minority students their "first home;" that is, the first caring and nurturing environment they would experience. For instance, one teacher said, "When [kids] go home they meet reality. I look at the school as though it was a little nurturing place for them and when they go back home, hell breaks loose." Another teacher commented, "We as the teachers are role models for these children. They have very little in the way of role models. I mean there are some parents who are good role models, but not most."

The impression that the school was a safe haven was supported by participants' views about deficits in parental abilities and social environments. Administrators, a counselor, and about one-third of the teachers opined that many parents were unfit to raise children, describing them as having mental retardation, mental illness, or problems with substance use. In one case, a rumor spread among school personnel that a woman who was appearing at every school function, but who seldom spoke, was



mentally retarded. One said, "You can see it in her face." During the evaluation process for possible special education, school personnel did not attempt to speak with the woman about her daughter's home situation or academic performance and did not take seriously any of her requests for information about her daughter's case, because they believed she would not understand. The mother stunned those present at the meeting when she asked carefully phrased questions that challenged the relationship between her daughter's psychological evaluation and the concept of learning disability, prospects of exiting special education, and the impact on her daughter of likely stigma from other children.<sup>1</sup>

Parents were also described as lacking strong child-rearing practices and not instilling positive views into their children. It was suspected that students faced negative experiences at home, which created negative worldviews thereby predisposing students to violent and antisocial behavior. Because parents were the purveyors of these attitudes, they were held responsible for outcomes. For example, the counselor said:

[Kids] are living with parents who might not have the parental skills they need to raise these children and its constant negative affirming that they get. And, that is a challenge. That is something that you like think you can erase. How can you do that?

Those who saw the school as a refuge described poverty as a factor in influencing home-school dialogue and in shaping the lives of children. Often, this was formulated not as a context of difficult circumstances but as a way to blame the parents themselves. Particularly African American parents were described as selecting and contributing to, if not creating, their social environments. For instance, the school psychologist said, "There are some very nice parents who are poor. Like this lady who was just here, she is a really good mom but, I would say that is not the majority." In one incident in which an outbreak of lice was reported, three siblings were infested twice. A counselor commented on the mother's lack of parenting skills saying, "We should have called HRS. She should have known they would get it again in that filthy house." Faculty and school leadership assumed knowledge of community members' living situations and motivations. Crime and poverty were facts of life in the area surrounding the school. Our observations and interviews with parents made clear to us that irrespective of these conditions, parents representing both communities worked to provide safe homes and instill what they considered to be positive values in their children. Sometimes these were at odds with the school.

Tied to negative attitudes about parents lacking formal education and living with modest financial means, there was a strong sense that

grandparents caring for children, large families, young parents, and other forms of “non-traditional” families were sources of students’ academic and behavioral problems and parents’ lack of interaction with the school. That a student was reared in an intergenerational family was occasionally offered as an explanation for school-home chasms. Some operated under the assumption that “non-traditional” family structures predispose children to low academic achievement and poor behavior.

Another, more prevalent, pattern was the claim that both Mexican and African American parents came to the school only for economic reasons. This view referred to the full service program, which provided meetings with meals, coordinated mental health services and financial assistance, and provided other forms of cost-free help, as well as the Trust Counselor’s and others’ autonomous programs. As explained earlier, relatively few parents took advantage of these programs. Some teachers claimed that parents came to the school only to have Welfare card signed or to have their children tested for exceptional student education in order to receive social security funds. As a general comment about parents, the counselor observed, “Once the parents find that they are eligible for social security money, they rush right in.”

#### *Experiments in Bridge Building*

Most teachers believed that their efforts to increase involvement did not produce the desired outcome. Yet some teachers and support personnel recognized that long workdays and other scheduling factors contributed to parents’ inability to participate in school-related activities. They also understood that low levels of involvement (especially help with homework and attendance at conferences) were tied to a lack of knowledge about how to help and intimidation. For example, one teacher explained:

We have varying educational levels from our parents. It’s hard because sometimes the few that are willing to help, it’s almost like we have to teach them what to do with their child. So, it’s not impossible, it’s just harder.

Another said, “A lot of them come from families who don’t understand their role in the school system either because their parents didn’t do it or because they were never shown it.” When asked how she would increase parent involvement, the counselor said, “Whatever it takes . . . You’ve got to go out there. You’ve got to knock on doors.” The social worker said that she often went to students’ homes and to their churches to make connections with families. She said, “I try to really get involved with the families so they can trust because a lot of the times the most important thing is to have a parent to really think you’re on their side.” The social worker’s visits often resulted in parents making regular visits to seek her advice or assistance.

Despite tremendous misalignment between school personnel and families, our data also show that the deep-seated cultural differences were not insurmountable. Specific aspects of the home-school dichotomy showed themselves to be amenable to simple, yet helpful interventions, and there were circumstances that encouraged and supported trust building. These included attention to logistics, effective communication, shared expectations, and seeking parent input beyond instrumental involvement.

One such aspect was related to logistical matters (e.g., access to transportation, work, and childcare for other children). One teacher, who had recently transferred from a more affluent school, said that she was accustomed to at least one easily accessible parent who would be able to come to the school with short notice. By contrast, parents at Bromden were often difficult to contact and “when you do get a hold of them they could lose their job if they leave.” Few parents had telephone numbers on file at the school and few owned personal vehicles.

When the school took these issues into consideration during planning meetings in which activities involving parents were discussed, the outcome was usually positive. Efforts to accommodate parents, by planning events according to their schedules, ensuring they had a point of contact at the school and knew how to use the telephone system, and ensuring they had transportation, were especially effective when initiated by school personnel involved with the community. For instance, the school had recently planned events in the evening and on weekends and hired a private bus driver to bring parents from the migrant labor camps. In addition, during the third year, three events were held at the labor camps late in the evenings and childcare was provided to accommodate working parents. While only two or three Mexican parents typically came to such meetings at the school, meetings at the labor camp were attended by 20-30 mothers each. And, while the few parents who used to come had little to say during meetings, those held at the camp often went long to accommodate the mothers who spoke openly. Two matters that could not be solved by school personnel were parents’ access to telephones and the fact that much of the Mexican population was transitory.

Another multi-faceted challenge was communication. Several types of miscommunication between home and school were apparent. At times, the barriers were simple ones of dialect—while parents used slang, teachers used jargon—and other times, language itself was an issue since most Mexicans communicated in Spanish. In addition, letters were often sent home in children’s backpacks with no guarantee of delivery. When they did get home, there was no guarantee they would be read since some parents were unable to read. When communication between home and school was not effective, teachers believed that students’ achievement

was affected. For instance, one teacher described how parents were unaware of whether their child had homework: "We ask the parents, 'Are you doing homework with the child?' They tell us, 'No, they never bring homework.'" Thus, techniques used to forge home-school communication were often ineffective.

Again, several instances proved that the communication gap could be bridged. The few teachers who were persistent and who used a variety of means to communicate with parents (e.g., positive reports home, home visits, and letters written by students) seemed to be more likely to have consistent two-way communication with parents. One teacher wrote notes sent home to parents that contained encouraging messages such as, "Please Read: parent + teacher = student success. Let's work together." When teachers attempted to learn and communicate in the parent's language, parents tended to respond favorably. For instance, one teacher began taking Spanish classes and turned to parents for help. She attempted to communicate with those parents in their language, and while the communication itself was not always clear, the meta-message of respect for the language was. Another had messages that were to be sent home translated to Spanish by a parent aid. Other barriers, such as those associated with the backpack express, were overcome with notes school personnel delivered directly to parents, an undertaking of two teachers, the social worker, and one counselor. A teacher said that especially in cases of discipline, "We have little letters that we carry out so that the parents will get it ... because [the students] know they've been in trouble and they are not going to carry it home and give it to them." This also provided an opportunity to speak with parents.

#### A "Cold, Nameless Place:"

##### Parent Perceptions of the School and its Environment

An equally powerful view of the school focused on its inefficiency and "institutional" feel. In interviews, Mexican and African American parents revealed mistrust, suspicion, low confidence, or aversion toward the school staff or toward schooling in general. Most African American parents had gone to the original school and maintained close contact with remaining teachers and staff. A few parents worked for the school, including the head custodian, two administrative aids and security personnel. A small percentage of parents, including recently arrived farmworkers, turned to the school's full service program as a means of information provision and, on occasion, financial assistance. Issues related to the changing of school boundaries, busing, and school renaming were icons of parents' and school employees' allegiance with the

former school. An underlying assumption was that faculty and staff came to work only to receive a paycheck and that they did not care about the academic success or lives of the community or its children. (A popular belief in the district was that only those teachers who could not secure employment elsewhere went to work at Bromden.)

The perceived chasm was sometimes reflected in an attitude of mistrust expressed by parents. A number of Mexican parents remained uninvolved with the school and did not feel comfortable because they feared their immigration status would be exposed. For others, mistrust or aversion of the school was often based on unsatisfactory past experiences such as disagreement with a decision the teacher had made, such as referral to the child study team. Oftentimes, such differences resulted in the parent becoming exasperated and withdrawing from contact with the school. In many cases, both Mexican and African American parents avoided the school altogether.

Some school staff members did not share this view. Administrative assistants and the head custodian who resided in the local community, teachers who were familiar with the previous school climate, and, beginning in the second year, the social worker and the counselor felt that the school did not actually provide the educational and social services it promised. They often stayed late and provided assistance beyond their normal duties as a personal mission where the school was unable to provide services. Sometimes aid was intangible. For instance, the counselor and the social worker visited homes in the evening to provide counseling or other services. Formal and informal financial and domestic assistance were also provided although their availability and distribution varied considerably from case to case. Occasionally, the research team noted teachers pooling money for families in which wage earners had lost their jobs. For example, a child's family was evicted after he illegally entered a neighbor's apartment. The social worker's autonomous program—a network of local churches and private funding sources—helped to locate food and shelter for the family and other school personnel collected a pool of money for them. Another observation noted a woman weeping with joy when the social worker found temporary shelter for her recently-arrived, undocumented family.

Parents were familiar with various forms of social services and were also familiar with the numerous agencies providing those services and making, from their perspective, random decisions about whom should receive what amount of which provisions and for what duration. Service coordinators, such as the social worker, agreed with this view after serving the full-service program for a year and witnessing programs begin and end with little notice. Adherents to this view perceived the

school as yet another institution designed to provide basic needs, but whose personnel provided assistance with indifference. The school and the district had renamed the school, altered its population, created and discontinued programs, and determined who was or was not eligible to receive services. Thus, parents' role was one of adapting to unending changes in formulae, as well as identifying and sharing with other parents ways to circumvent policies. For instance, parents who became accustomed to Boy Scouts providing afterschool care had to seek other services when its pilot project was discontinued. Parents who became involved in health screening and free dental services, provided by a university were faced with constant changes in service, frequent no shows of the mobile unit, and occasional withdrawal of service. And, so the list goes.

Participants (many of whom withdrew their participation from the study) described situations in which they sought assistance from the school's full-service program and were turned away. Community, government, and non-profit funded satellite programs affiliated with the full-service program withdrew their services with little or no notice. Interventions and services offered on the school site by universities and community-based organizations were also ephemeral, especially when externally funded research and intervention projects were complete or when organizations shifted their foci. For instance, a local university medical school received funding to pilot a mobile pediatric center that provided examinations and basic medical services free of charge once a month. The parents became aware of the program by word of mouth or through the African American community involvement specialist. Since most families did not have health insurance, by the third visit, a long line of African American parents formed early. On the day of the fifth visit, a line of twenty parents and twenty three children was formed a half hour before the van was scheduled to arrive. Forty five minutes later the full-service coordinator came to tell them that it was not coming and that it was unlikely to return. After such repeated turndowns, many parents stopped approaching the school for assistance.

In the "cold, nameless place," some parents suggested that the school's lack of caring negatively affected their child's behavior and academic performance. In a few extreme cases, the school was held responsible directly. Although this view was held by Mexican and African American parents, mostly the latter confronted school personnel. For example, during her daughter's staffing for special education, an African American mother said that her daughter was bright and intelligent before coming to the school, but that she received two head injuries at the school, which "left her damaged." A few parents of children involved in child study teams or of children who had gotten into serious trouble

shared the opinion that school is the place where their child internalized labels of inferiority. An African American mother, referring to her son's recent suspension, said, "He's called bad until he becomes bad." In other cases the school environment and other students were held chiefly responsible for influencing negative behaviors. Parents associated this with the school's inability to control its environment. In some cases, when directed to others at the school, parents focused on the boundary decision. One Mexican mother said that her son was always good at home and in his previous school, but that he began engaging in fist fights when he came into contact with "those students."

### Discussion

Based on our findings, we contend that disorganization, lack of communication, varying definitions of parent involvement, and unequal power relations hampered substantive parent involvement. We further conclude that these barriers reduce the school's capacity to engage parents in sustainable, meaningful home-school collaboration. At the conclusion of our research, the school had made some concessions, appeared to be listening selectively to parents' felt needs, and, although their efforts were fragmented, stakeholders had made strides toward increasing the number of parents responding to meeting requests and attending conferences. It is unlikely that these are sufficient for sustaining school improvement. Since misperceptions and communication barriers reinforce bias and hamper stakeholders' ability to work on solutions, missing from Bromden is a substantive relationship based on accurate perceptions, clear communication, and a commitment to collaboration. Such a relationship may enable the school-community unit to begin designing a common mission and make strides toward achieving its aims.

Experiences with the school, limited knowledge about other cultures, and varying expectations contributed to differences in the ways parents and school personnel perceived and related to each other. For some, the school offered indifference and, sometimes, contempt. Children were not expected to fare any better than did their parents through formal education. When parents asserted themselves against school authority, they ultimately reproduced their lower status. For others, a maxim was reversed to say, "School is a child's first home," embodying notions of cultural deficit in homes and in the community and defined the school as children's first source of middle class models of normalcy. Since parent involvement is instrumental for achieving state standards, non-conformity and apparent dysfunction were perceived barriers to achieving those goals. Partnership, however, would require sharing power and regula-



tion of involvement. Thus, partnership was avoided while compliance was expected.

If parent involvement's fundamental purpose is to foster substantive interaction so that student outcomes can be improved, then instrumental compliance is insufficient. Bromden's programs provided the dominant framework for parent involvement, a top-down approach, which not only averted interaction between families and the school, but also separated Mexicans and African Americans in their interactions with each other. Drake (1995) asserts, "Effective school-home collaboration occurs when parents and educators share common goals, see each other as equals, and support the students' education wholeheartedly." Perhaps boundaries could be redrawn not by coercion, but through an exploration of various perspectives, a course that may require both patience and considerable effort but seems to be generally associated with mutually beneficial outcomes.

Cultural difference is not a barrier to achieving a school's educational goals. Instead it is an essential element of collaboration to see all stakeholders as capable of offering valuable "funds of knowledge" (Moll 1992) and "family assets" (Maton, et al, 2003). Geertz (2001: 78) recently asserted, "It is the asymmetries . . . between what we believe or feel and what others do, that make it possible to locate where we now are in the world, how it feels to be there, and where we might or might not want to go." Encounters with difference allow opportunities to try out new ways of relating to the world. Increased cultural familiarity may come with a revision of perception. The expected outcome is a step toward mutual benefit.

So, who can make those initial connections? For one, children are situated in a socialized liminal space between home and school. Whether congratulated or not for their success in mastering knowledge and gaining new skills in school and at home, each child's habitus is shaped in these social settings. Not only are they recipients of social capital, but students are also brokers for it. Furthermore, both African Americans and Mexicans maintain social networks that provide children and families necessary tools to negotiate day-to-day life. Volunteers, participating parents, a handful of teachers, as well as custodians and secretaries who reside in the community, tie the community and school together. These, too, are potential resources linking families and the school.

Despite its physically and socially remote location, Bromden possesses tremendous human and tangible resources. By refocusing these assets, the school could become a powerful community symbol once again. As a locus of habitus and ideology construction, Bromden, and schools like it, have an opportunity to transcend deeply entrenched

notions about cultural boundaries to instead promote mutually agreed upon foundations. The current framework may be challenged by examining the expectations not only for the brief time children are in school, but sharing broadly defined ideals such as high expectations and equality that future adults may possess.

### *Recommendations*

1. The school must gain the trust of the parents by making them feel appreciated and valued. This is supported both by existing research (Pena, 2000) and the chasm between truly involved and disengaged parents at Bromden.

2. Include parents in the decision-making process about school affairs. Including them at all levels will make parents true partners in the planning process.

3. Form relationships between students, teachers, and parents that last beyond the typical school year. We believe that the transient nature of the relationships between professionals, parents and students at Bromden led to some of the disconnection that we noted.

4. Establish meaningful ways for parents to become involved in the school by giving them real responsibilities. The parents that viewed their time at the school as simply busy work were quickly turned off from continuing or deepening their involvement. One way to do this is to build from families' intellectual and social capital.

5. Create a strategic plan for parent involvement either by way of following an established model or by developing and implementing a strategic plan rather than having an array of available programs and services with little planning to ensure that overlap is reduced and all parties' needs are being met.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> As that mother's involvement at the school increased (she came to breakfasts, volunteered in the media center, and met with the social worker) she gradually became, from the faculty and administrators' point of view, a nuisance. Subsequently, she was avoided as her name was omitted from the events invitation list, the social worker's schedule could not accommodate her, and as the principal remarked, "I hide when I see her coming."

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